



TED DUNN

R community chapters

Where Two or More Are Gathered

It has been said, "Where two or more are gathered, there is politics." Though many religious communities have embraced communal discernment as their preferred means for electing leadership, they are still not immune to the pulls and trappings of politics. Seeking to hear the voice of the Spirit through communal discernment can, at its best, eclipse and far surpass the influence of politics. Communal discernment, however, no matter how well practiced, will neither eradicate politics nor guarantee that there will be no regressive pulls in chapters of election. But awareness of the differences between discernment and politics can help chapter participants resist the forces of politics and secure the grace-filled opportunities of discernment.

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Review for Religious

When discernment and politics collide, how can chapter participants make sense of all the forces in play? During a chapter of election, what are some of the regressive urges that may work against a community's efforts at discernment? What are some of the differences between "political" conversations and "discerning" ones? These are questions I address in this article.

We are not likely to rid ourselves of politics completely, but I am confident that, if communities commit themselves to communal discernment, they can grow in their capacity to use it well. From my years of facilitating communal discernment, I am confident that goodwill and good ways of channeling it can enhance discernment and diminish politicking. This, in turn, can help communities to seek God's will more fully and thereby discern their choice of leadership more wisely. In line with this I plan to point out some differences between discernment and politics from three angles, namely, numbers, powers of persuasion, and so-called winners and losers. But first I want to set the context by elaborating on *regression* (returning to old patterns). Regression often emerges during chapters of election and, if left unrecognized and unchecked, can blight a community's desire to put discernment ahead of politics.

Regression in the Face of Discernment

For a chapter to be a success, its participants should check their human propensities to constrict the movement of the Spirit, and instead work collectively toward welcoming the Spirit present among them to liberate and enlighten. They should seek ways of enhancing their own spiritual freedom and that of the group, avoiding anything that might hinder it. They need to be alert to personal and group patterns of regression and strive to eliminate them. I would guess that every

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community has had, at one time or another, a dark moment in which its chapter of election fell far short of its best intentions and let, for example, politics take precedence over discernment. I would also guess that—although such a moment tends to recede from the community's consciousness between chapters—it often returns at the beginning of the next chapter. It is as if the walls of the chapter hall hold the memories and, when the chapter is convoked, so too are the memories.

Despite such experiences, or perhaps because of them, individuals and communities I am acquainted with have made courageous efforts to move beyond the pain of past elections and write new memories upon the walls. I have witnessed participants building new bridges, mending frayed relationships, offering and accepting olive branches, and all in all seeking greater unity. Communities yearn to grow in discernment and put forth their best green-gold efforts when given the opportunity.

Yet I also know that, as in all growing, communities are at risk. They repeat old patterns of tension and vulnerability. As a psychologist I recognize that *regression* is a natural and normal response in the face of threat. It is a coping mechanism that people use when new ways of behaving seem shaky or are perceived as failing. Think of the first time you tried a new prayer form and it was not working for you. You likely sought refuge, at least temporarily, in the tried and true. Recall a return to your family of origin. Despite your growth in other relationships, in a difficult interaction with a relative you may have returned to a once-outlived means of coping (withdrawing, clashing, and so forth). Recall your community's initial efforts at the more fluid processes of communal discernment and the simultaneous urges to return to the familiar confines of Robert's Rules and carefully orchestrated conversations.

When it comes to elections, politics is what is most familiar to us. It is part of our culture and is no less a part of religious life. *Discernment is newly learned and also countercultural behavior.* And so, when tensions arise during a chapter, you have any number of urges to return to old patterns, the patterns of politics. You may have urges to rally around your friends, to defend perceived "victims," to speak for those not speaking. You may want to tune out, or argue with what you do not want to hear, or go silent in the hope of being rescued by others more vocal. You may want to have the meeting outside the meeting (in the halls and over coffee) instead of in the assembly room. You may want to campaign for some, and against some others, and so on.

The good news is that such urges do not have to be your destiny. Your next chapter presents you with the challenge and opportunity to write new memories on the walls of your assembly room. It is a chance to further reconcile and redeem the pain of past elections. It is a chance to weave new patterns of interacting into the collective experience of chapters of election and place discernment ahead of politics. But the undertow toward politics will, if left unrecognized, take away your freedom and wreak havoc upon your desire to grow beyond your past. If it is recognized, however, communities have the opportunity to catch themselves and choose instead the grace and gift of communal discernment.

Politics as an Impediment to Discernment

We humans have an insatiable appetite for politics. Enquiring minds want to know: Who's on first? Who's it

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going to be? Who's ahead in the polls? In an election year, politics and politicians dominate the evening news, CNN, and the front page. Political talk is with us at meals and up and down hallways and sidewalks. Religious communities, it seems to me, are no less involved with politics. In fact, if politics means involvement, interest, and concern for how you govern yourselves, religious are just as political as any other segment of society. They desire to understand what is going on in the world, in the church, and in the community and to participate in shaping the future.

Politics, then, has its good points, but it is important to understand its pitfalls and get beyond them in order to do the deeper work of communal discernment. One risk is that politics and discernment have definite similarities. Both lead to an informed vote in an election. Both seek understanding and involvement. In both methods, information serves to influence people and to moderate that influence. And both methods are about power. There are other commonalities as well, but there are definite distinctions to be drawn too. Where does politics end and discernment begin?

Numbers. First let us talk numbers. Numbers sometimes talk long before people get acquainted with the candidates and their character. In the politics of our day, there are endless permutations of the numbers. Numbers are the heartbeat of American pre-election activity. Pollsters keep taking political pulses and making election prognostications. There are more permutations of polls than there are stats on the Super Bowl. Results are statistically projected hours before the polls close. Such results are not official, of course, but they cause people to think and say, "Why vote? It's a done deal."

In discernment, however, the significance of numbers is little or none. In many discernment processes a

member needs only one endorsement to enter into it. And entering is far more important than trying to forecast where you will end up. Entering the mystery, walking the Emmaus journey, searching out your future together by collectively seeking God's intentions—these things are not concerned with numbers. Numbers will not answer a community's quest for healing, yearnings for a stronger partnership, desires for deeper understanding, or efforts to resolve differences. Counting numbers, wondering how many votes you or someone else might get, will not help you hear the voice of the Spirit. You cannot take a poll to find out what God wants.

Numbers at the moment of election have a different, though still secondary, importance. Ideally, numbers are the result of, not the means for, discernment. Ideally, they are the outcome that confirms the will of the Spirit mediated through the chapter. I do not know about your community, but in some communities, once the balloting begins, discernment goes out the window and people start listening to the numbers. They write the numbers down, tally the votes, and track who is getting what. Like a runaway train people start following the numbers instead of the Spirit. The numbers take over.

It is important to work as a chapter body to prevent a numbers-oriented election. Facilitators need to intersperse processes into the election itself to help the community discern its way through to the end. Ideally, the election process should be the culmination of the discernment process, not detached or separate from discernment. In my experience, when an election keeps the integrity of the discerning body and its discernment process intact, then numbers, if used at all, are of negligible importance.

Powers of Persuasion. In politics, power is sought from a variety of sources through a variety of means. Power is



found first in the money used for campaigning. Money pays for ads and buys favors from special-interest groups that in turn lobby for their candidates. In one form or another, money runs the machinery that shapes the information that people receive, which is of course the ultimate means of influence. In American politics "information is power," and, if you want to know who has it, "follow the money."

While voters want information about what their candidates hope to accomplish, and while politicians vow that they will "stick to the issues," too often there is regression toward name-calling and mudslinging. Politicians know that there is great power in casting doubt upon their opponents. So-called "negative campaigning" persists despite the public outcry against it, in large part because research shows that when used skillfully it works. Political elections, as we have witnessed, are not about how you play the game; they are about winning, no matter the cost.

Politics centers on persuasion as a means to attain desired outcomes. Spin doctors seek to persuade by parsing the truth. Political strategists provide different information for different target groups, strategically timing the leakage of news, all in an effort to sway specific voters. Party politics uses these powers of persuasion to garner support for their respective camps, which in turn support their candidates. Selective information to induce fear or call for party loyalty is among the powers of persuasion in American politics.

In discernment, though, how you play the game and what kind of power you use make all the difference. The power of discernment rests on *faith*. It rests on your ability to pray, reflect, and journey together in such a way as to discover your collective truth, to experience the movement of the Spirit among yourselves. Paradoxically,

the power of discernment is inversely related to persuading others or controlling the outcome. In fact, *detachment* from the outcome, rather than attempting to engineer the outcome, is a hallmark of discernment.

Discernment requires conversations about the direction your community is moving, the issues you face, and the ideal team to facilitate the desired movement. It is about who can complement whom, not who is better than whom. It is not about camps competing around special interests. It is about cooperating in the interests of the whole. Instead of trying to convince others of your truth, communal discernment invites you to discover the community's collective truth. Discernment is not about campaigning, convincing, and cajoling, but about listening, sharing, and deepening the common understanding. Chapter participants are not chosen to elect favorite candidates to represent personal interests, but rather to come up with a team of persons who together can best serve the interests of the entire community.

I believe that the power of communal discernment is in direct proportion to a group's determination to be enlightened by one another and by the commitment of all to the common good. This power is present in direct proportion to your freedom, individually and collectively, to respond to the Spirit echoed in the voices of all the chapter members. It is present to the degree you are interiorly free from whatever might bind you, be it your loyalties to others, passions around your own agendas, fears of being hurt or hurting others, or haunting and hurting memories. It is present when people are free of

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prejudice and free of gossip reputations, of labels that persist year after year.

Being free, however, does not mean an absence of anxiety and fears. Rather, it means a willingness to name, claim, and, if possible, work through your fears rather than succumb to them. It means acknowledging your desired outcomes while simultaneously relinquishing any efforts to control them. It means a willingness to enter the unpredictability and mystery of your personal and communal faith journey. If you are free enough to embrace a truth larger than your own—free of efforts to hide from uncomfortable truths or blind yourselves to a common good that may ask more of you than you want to give—then your power to discern is enhanced.

The power of such spiritual freedom is yours to claim. No one can claim it for you or work towards it for you. Freedom is inherently yours to begin with. If you do this work collectively, if you maintain deep roots of knowledge, passion, and conviction while holding all things lightly, then you will have access to the Spirit moving through you and among you. The movement of the Spirit and your own search for enlightenment and understanding are at the heart of discernment. Discernment is the polar opposite of politics. It is a continuous focus on winning, not on having won and resting on our laurels.

Winners and Losers. Let us talk about so-called winners and losers. Who is better? The St. Louis Rams or the Dallas Cowboys, the French or the Irish, African Americans or Caucasians or Hispanics, rich or poor, tall or short, women at the well or men at the “Y,” a lilac or a rose? We humans are prone to thinking in categories and classes. We have carved up God’s creation into categories. We have boxed and labeled the people and things of our world as good or bad, right or wrong, winners or losers.

We have prejudices, biases, preconceived notions, assumptions, and conscious and subconscious judgments that put price tags on so many things that God looked at and said are “good.” God sees us all as both blessed and broken, but we seem to view ourselves as good, better, best, less than good or less than evil, depending upon our looks, ethnicity, friends, affiliations, or supposed motives.

Children not chosen for this or that often feel “excluded” and “hurt.” Out of such feelings we form judgments and begin to think in terms of winners and losers. From facilitating many community discernments over the years, I consider all participants winners. All community members who are endorsed, who come to discernment gatherings, who respond to the call to serve in elected leadership are winners. They take risks that have brought hurts in the past and perhaps even made them say to themselves “Never again.”

Those who participate in discernment are asked to reach deep inside themselves to find hope again, when staying disengaged would be easier. Individually and together they are winners as they extend themselves beyond their comfort zone in response to calls from their community.

Conventional politics would suggest that those who are elected have the “right stuff” and those who are not elected do not. Communal discernment, however, is about electing women or men who bring together a complement of gifts that, in its unity, is important for the entire community.

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Not long ago my wife and I attended our daughters' graduations, Kelly from high school and Colleen from middle school. For the occasion we went out to buy them some flowers. The florist asked, "What are their colors?" I was taken aback, having expected to pick out bouquets from the showcase and be done with it. She escorted us to a refrigerator, showed us a vast array of flowers, and urged us to have a whiff and take a good look at them. Before long we had flowers and greenery and paper strewn over the counter. Other customers watched us try various combinations to see what would best fit each girl's particular likes and sense of beauty. There were lilacs, roses, and other flowers whose names escape me. In combination, some were not the right color and some not the right fragrance. Some got lost alongside others. All were beautiful in their own right, but some fit better than others in the bouquets. At last we had two unique bouquets, each beautiful, each saying what we wanted to say.

In your next communal discernment, remember that every individual has a beauty all her own. Blessed and broken, gifted and flawed, they are on the same journey as you. Some combinations of their beauty will express what you want to say, what you hope leadership to be. Others will not. This makes them no less wonderful, no less worthy. Their beauty will find other bouquets. In your next discernment, honor all these women (or men) with your prayers. Support all of them with your encouragement. Affirm them for their courage in walking deep into discernment with you, opening themselves up in personal ways to you, to each other, and to God. Walk gently with them.

Your next chapter of election will be a continuation of the work you have begun at earlier chapters. It presents you with an opportunity to grow in communal discernment and

be more faithful on your personal and communal faith journey. Anticipate, identify, and resist any regressive tendencies. Keep the election a matter of the Spirit, not a matter of mere numbers. Do not let it be about winners and losers. You are all winners, for you are all on the same team. Be gentle with yourselves and with your mistakes, for mistakes will surely be made. In your efforts to write new memories on the walls, may the Holy Spirit be your guide, and, where two or more of you are gathered, may you find Jesus in your midst.

The Transient Seed

*To go wherever you would lead
Will mean ourselves to die,
Forsaking self and every need
For you, risen, on high.*

*Buried with you, the transient seed
Awaits your Spirit-cry
Creating us anew, rubied
By blood from Calvary.*

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